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Editorial

THE AUTHORITY OF THE COMMUNITY AND THE LIBERTY OF THE INDIVIDUAL

The community has some right of control over the individual; this all but the anarchist will admit. The individual has some right of independent action; only an absolute despot will deny this. To find the place where these two rights meet, a *modus vivendi* under which each may be conserved without undue encroachment on the other—this is the problem of the centuries, over which many battles have been fought, and much blood shed. It is only one phase, but a very important one, of the perennially mooted question of authority.

COMMUNITY CONTROL INSIDE AND OUTSIDE THE LAW

A certain measure of the community's rightful control of the individual is exercised through legislatures, courts, and police. But beyond the sphere of statutory law there is a zone of influence in which the community with more or less articulate voice demands that the individual shall limit the exercise of his freedom in deference to the judgment or preference of the community. It resents the too wide departure of the individual from conventional usage even in such matters as dress and voice, and personal opinions on religion, morals, or politics. Nor can it be denied that this claim of the community to extra-legal authority over the individual is justified, if only it be not pushed to excess. No man is an isolated unit. His every action promotes or hinders the welfare of the community. The community has a stake in his conduct, and a right to demand that he shall consider its welfare.

LIMITATIONS OF THE COMMUNITY'S RIGHT OF CONTROL

Such authority of the community over the individual has its undoubted limits. It lies primarily in the sphere of conduct rather than of thought. The community may justly demand that I shall not rasp its nerves and shock its sensibilities by eccentric manners or style of dress, as it may certainly require that I abstain from conduct that more obviously and seriously invades its rights. But it clearly has no right to insist that I shall admire the picture which it happens to be fashionable to applaud, or agree with popular opinion as to the beauty of a particular type of architecture. The church may rightly expect of its members that they conform to established usages of worship as well as to its moral standards, and of its ministers that their public teaching shall either reinforce the historical ideals of the church, or, if it diverge from these, shall evidently be dictated by a loyal desire for the larger spiritual efficiency of the church. But when an ecclesiastical authority assumes a right of inquisition into the thinking of the layman or the clergyman, demanding that either of them shall conform his thinking to the views handed down from the past, it is entering upon a course that is in grave danger of involving not only oppression of the individual, but in the long run most serious evil to the church. The authority of the common judgment is manifestly limited also by that of the individual conscience. For the authority of the latter cannot be denied without at the same time destroying all ground on which the former can be affirmed. To demand the subjection of the individual conscience to the average judgment of the community for anything less than very weighty reasons affecting the welfare of the community involves a wrong to the individual and in the end robs the community of one of its greatest values. Indeed, aside from those cases which properly fall within the scope of law enforced by power, the authority of the community is rather a right to demand that its judgment and its interests shall receive due consideration in the process by which the individual determines his course of action than that he shall regard the common judgment as decisive for his own decision, whether in the sphere of thought or of action. Dissent is in the last analysis a question for the individual conscience. The community may in obedience to its conscience punish it, but the right of the Christ to

bear his witness, and, if need be, seal his testimony with the blood of the cross—this we must not deny.

EXAMPLES OF RIGHTFUL DEFERENCE TO THE COMMON JUDGMENT

Yet when these limitations have been recognized, there remains the important fact that the individual is a member of the community and as such is under obligation to identify himself vitally with the interests of the community, and to a certain extent to conform his conduct to the judgment and will of the community. To live in a community whose common conscience is strongly in favor of total abstinence and to defy this common sentiment in one's own practice would be foolish if not wicked. An honest man may honestly disapprove the sentiment of the community in which he lives respecting marriage and divorce, and may even believe that conformity to this sentiment involves unnecessary or unjust suffering on his part; yet to defy that sentiment might be to inflict on the community a wrong far greater than any that he is himself suffering. One may believe that the usages of his community in respect to the Sabbath are unnecessarily strict, and that this strictness is working damage morally and religiously to the youth of the community. In such a case it may be the duty of the dissenter from common opinion to endeavor to change the sentiment of the community, and to bring it, it may be, into closer conformity with New Testament teaching. Yet it is not less certain that he will do well to treat that sentiment with respect rather than violence, lest he may find that the only result of his efforts is disrepute for himself and alienation of the youth from the moral life of the community, to the danger of both.

THIS DEFERENCE DUE IN THOUGHT AS WELL AS DEED

But it is not in the sphere of conduct only that the principle has its application. It holds also in that of opinion. The message begotten in the soul of the prophet, the conclusion of the scholar, product of his laborious thought, it is the right and the duty of prophet and scholar to utter. Nor may they withhold their message because it will shock the ears on which it falls. It has been ever so with the really needed messages. But neither prophet nor scholar may forget that the opinions which he is combating and endeavoring to

modify or displace had their beginning also in the soul of some prophet or the mind of some scholar, and still retain something of the sacredness that belongs to the newer message. Still more important is it for the thinker of today to remember that these for him outlived dogmas have entered into the souls of men of the present day, have been to them the inspiration to high living, have become the fiber of their hearts, the blood in their veins. He may seek to change them—perhaps he must. But he cannot do it with reckless disregard either of the pain he is to inflict or the actual damage he may do to the moral life of those of whose life they are a part.

But more than this—before it becomes a question of expression, when it is still a problem of the prophet's or the scholar's own conviction, these facts concerning the origin and present significance of old opinions demand to be taken into account. The great beliefs that the church has held for centuries, born in hours of earnest struggle after light and truth, the consolation of martyrs, the inspiration of strong men through years of toil and strife—on these one may not lay hands hastily. What has happened before may happen again, and therefore to these great beliefs there may succeed other closer approximations to truth, as they in their day displaced older creeds. But the thinker of today cannot but pause and weigh well the claims of the older thought that once was new, before he gives even in his own mind final assent to that product of his own thinking that seems so clear and so clearly true.

THE DUTY OF SILENCE AND OF MUTUAL RESPECT

These contentions are obvious enough; few will dissent from them. But they carry with them important practical corollaries.

First, there is the duty not only of speech but of silence. If anywhere liberty is a sacred right with which none may interfere, if anywhere independence is a sacred duty which one dare not surrender, it is in the soul of man. This no man may bind. To himself and the community and the cause of truth every thinker owes it to think honestly. But if to this duty of honest thinking there be added the obligation not needlessly to run counter to the thought of the community, it follows that silence may sometimes be one's highest duty. Within its proper limitations it is not, as often alleged, cowardice

or insincerity, but due respect for the rights of the community and due regard for its welfare.

But then speech is also sometimes a duty.

A second corollary is the mutual respect which men of opposite types of mind or different functions in society owe one another. One man is fitted by temperament, position, education to be a conservator of our goodly inheritance from the past, and because fitted for it, called to this office. Another without disrespect for the past, possibly a more thorough student of it than the other, is born to be the proclaimer of new things in thinking and in life. Each may be supremely loyal to the sacred cause of truth, and neither have occasion of complaint of the other. Both types of men are needed. If only each recognize the need of the other, and each temper his ardor for his own task by recognition of the value of the other's, they may work effectively together for the welfare of mankind.